



The Lincoln Kinsman

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The Ann Rutledge Myth

No episode in the eventful story of Abraham Lincoln has been dramatized to such an extent as his alleged romance with Ann Rutledge, yet the whole tradition which has been noted as one of the famous love affairs in American literature is largely a myth. Although it has been called "one of the world's most classic stories," the legend should not be included among historical records when it properly belongs to the realm of fiction.

William Herndon, the chief of all Lincoln myth-makers, was mainly responsible for the development of the Lincoln-Rutledge romance myth and gave wide circulation to this fiction through a lecture which he published emphasizing the alleged infatuation of Abraham Lincoln for the daughter of the New Salem tavern-keeper.

Lincoln historians who have made careful studies of the sources relating to the New Salem period of Lincoln's life give little credence to the highly colored story of Lincoln's wooing of Ann Rutledge. They are more inclined to observe with some degree of in-

terest Lincoln's actual romance with Mary Owens, which occurred in the same community a year after Ann's death, and which is a romance based on dependable data.

Confused Memories

After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, which had a tendency to immortalize him, every man or woman who could recall an incident by which they or their family had been associated with him immediately tried to bring to mind the eventful contact.

The people who had lived in New Salem, Illinois, while Lincoln resided there had to go back thirty years to recall the incidents associated with their fellow townsman, and it is not strange that their memories were somewhat confused about certain incidents which may have occurred in the community so long ago.

In the short history of New Salem which survived as a town less than a decade, it was recalled that there was a girl living near there who died about the time she was to have been married

(Ann Rutledge, 1835). It was known that Lincoln pursued an ardent courtship in the town with a girl (Mary Owens, 1836) who refused his proposal of marriage. Some of the people also remembered that Lincoln had a love affair shortly after leaving New Salem (Mary Todd, 1839), and it broke up leaving him in a state of mental collapse.

With all these episodes of romance occurring within a period of four or five years more than a quarter of a century before, it is not strange that from this hazy background there should emanate a confusion of memories about the love affairs of a certain young man who resided in the pioneer village. The Ann Rutledge of fiction really became a composite character who represented three different young women of Abraham Lincoln's acquaintance.

The Herndon Lecture

Lincoln was hardly in his grave before Herndon began to draw upon the sources of folklore from people who once lived in the extinct town of New Salem. Less than two months had elapsed before he was carrying on some correspondence with John Hill, son of Samuel Hill.

John Hill was born a year after Ann Rutledge died and was but three years old when Lincoln left New Salem for Springfield, so we would not expect him to speak with any first hand knowledge about a traditional courtship between them. Hill had written to Herndon previous to June 12, 1865, telling the story that Lincoln was in love with Ann, that she was promised to someone else, that she died, and that Lincoln became crazy as a bat. As far as we can learn,

this is the earliest traditional story of the romance, and it was told by one who could not possibly have been a witness to the incidents he mentioned.

Possibly it was this lead in the letter written to him by Hill that eventually sent Herndon about a year later out to the Sand Ridge community seven miles from New Salem to interview John McNamar. He was the real and only lover of Ann Rutledge and the man to whom she was betrothed at the time of her death. The interview took place on Sunday morning, October 14, 1866, at McNamar's home near New Salem.

Apparently the contribution of chief value which came to Herndon from his interview with McNamar was atmosphere. The emotional reaction of McNamar as he referred to Miss Rutledge apparently impressed Herndon more deeply than any of the facts which McNamar related, as they were not in harmony with the story which had already taken form in Herndon's imagination. After commenting on McNamar's weeping scene, upon mention of Ann Rutledge's death which had occurred thirty years before, Herndon suggests that McNamar probably purchased the farm on which he was then living "because of the sad memories that cluster over and around it." It is well known that McNamar purchased the place four years previous to Ann's death, so Herndon's conclusion was as far-fetched here as in other instances.

In the atmosphere of the weeping McNamar, the grave of his betrothed, and a day spent at New Salem, Herndon began to prepare his famous lecture on "Abraham Lincoln, Ann Rutledge, New Salem, Pioneering and the

Poem." It took Herndon about one month to prepare the address and it was delivered in Springfield, Illinois, on November 16, 1866. Although there were few people present at the lecture, Herndon had the material printed in broadside form and it was placed on sale at the news stands. Magazines and newspapers copied it and the Lincoln-Rutledge myth was on its way for approval. The address contained about 12,000 words.

Herndon's opening statement in the concluding division of the lecture was: "I do not think—wishing to arrogate nothing to myself—that any living man or woman so well understands the many delicate wheels and hidden springs of the story of Lincoln, Miss Rutledge, the Poem, and its relation to the two in time and place, as I do."

Certainly Herndon's entire information about this romance came to him secondhand. He was born in 1818 and was only eleven years old when Ann first arrived in New Salem. It is doubtful if Herndon ever saw her, as he was only seventeen years old at the time of her death and would have emphasized the fact if he had met her.

Herndon makes no claim that Lincoln ever mentioned the name of Miss Rutledge to him or confided in him about this alleged romance, yet he states, on what authority we do not know, that "Abraham Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge with all his soul, mind, and strength. She loved him as dearly, tenderly, affectionately. They seemed made in Heaven for each other." Herndon also made this extravagant statement, "Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge better than his own life."

Ann's Real Lover

Ann Rutledge did have a lover at New Salem and when she died she was still engaged to him, but his name was not Abraham Lincoln. The young man who won the hand of Ann Rutledge was John McNamar, alias John McNeil. McNamar came to New Salem in 1829 the very year the town site was settled by Ann's father, James Rutledge, and his nephew, John Cameron. McNamar in partnership with Samuel Hill opened a store on the hill just above the Rutledge-Cameron mill. Later Rutledge converted his log cabin into a four room tavern and McNamar became one of his first boarders.

Already in love with the tavern-keeper's daughter, McNamar soon became engaged to her. Possibly anticipating an early marriage McNamar purchased on July 26, 1831 a forty acre tract, part of the farm owned by Ann's father. McNamar also purchased another farm adjacent to the Rutledge property. In this last land transaction Abraham Lincoln assisted McNamar in drawing up the papers consummating the deal. Desiring to make the title of the land secure McNamar confided in Lincoln that, although he had gone under the assumed name of John McNeil, his real name was John McNamar, and he pledged Lincoln to keep that part secret. He claimed he had changed his name to prevent his movements from becoming known to his parents. Later McNamar took his fiancée into his confidence about his real name which she would some day be wearing.

If the Rutledges at that early day were claiming descent from the famous Rutledge family of North Caro-

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SUBJECTS DISCUSSED IN FORMER ISSUES
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1. The Colonial Lincolns, 2. The Unknown Hanks Ancestry, 3. The Herrings of Virginia, 4. Five Shipley Sisters, 5. The Todd Family, 6. Bush Family Documents, 7. Early 19th Century Lincolns, 8. Kentucky Archives, 9. Abraham Lincoln's Father, 10. Hon. Robert Todd Lincoln, 11. James Wright Sparrow, 12. Uncle Mordecai Lincoln, 13. Thomas (Tad) Lincoln, 14. The Tennessees Lincolns, 15. The Lincolns of Hingham, 16. The Richard Berry Family, 17. Southern Branch of the Hankses, 18. The Lincolns of England, 19. Synopsis Life of Lincoln, 20. Lincoln's Letters to His Wife, 21. Correspondence With Kinsmen, 22. A Hanks Family Tree, 23. New Jersey Lincolns, 24. The Pennsylvania Lincolns, 25. Nottoway River Hanks Colony, 26. Relatives of Lincoln's Wife, 27. The Lincolns' Kentucky Neighbors, 28. The Lincolns of Virginia, 29. Roanoke River Hanks Colony, 30. Lincoln's Mythical Childhood Homes, 31. The Paternity Myth, 32. The Shiftless Father Myth, 33. The Maternal Lineage Myth, 34. The Poverty Myth.

lina they too may have been practicing some deception, as there is positive evidence that they were not descendants from the illustrious family of that name who provided one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Neither pseudonyms nor doubtful family heritages, however, influenced the romance of John and Ann.

After a four year residence in New Salem McNamar decided to visit his parents in New York state and promised Ann that upon his return they would be married. Some correspondence passed between Ann and McNamar during the early part of his visit, but several misfortunes which

befell him caused the letters to be sent at greater intervals. McNamar's father was taken ill and the son felt it his duty to remain with him. The old gentleman passed away and then there was the estate to settle, which task evolved upon John. By the time he could get his mother, his brothers and sisters in the notion of migrating to New Salem, nearly three years had passed. After his prolonged visit McNamar arrived in New Salem to learn that his sweetheart had passed away, and that his plans for the anticipated wedding were frustrated.

The news correspondent, George Alfred Townsend, visited Herndon at Springfield in January 1867, two months after the famous address, and wrote out the substance of his conversation with Lincoln's former law partner for the *New York Tribune*. With respect to the death of Ann Rutledge he claimed Herndon told him this:

"About the time when they, (Abraham and Ann) passed from courtesy to tenderness, and marriage between them was more than hinted at, the sick man (McNamar) returned like a ghost, gauged the condition of affairs, and upbraided the lady with fickleness. She had a delicate sense of honor, and felt keenly the shame of having seemed to trifle with two gentlemen at once; this preyed upon her mind till her body, not very strong, suffered by sympathy, and Mr. Herndon has oral and written testimony that the girl died out of regret at the equivocal position she had unwittingly assumed. The names of all the parties he has given me, but I do not care to print them." (Townsend p. 7).

Twenty-three years after Herndon delivered his famous lecture, he wrote to Jesse Weik, "Again the more I think of the Ann Rutledge story the more do I think that the girl had two engagements, i.e., that she was engaged to two men at one and the same time." (Hertz p. 236).

Lincoln's New Salem Years

Lincoln took up his residence at New Salem in July 1831, three years after John McNamar had settled there. He went to live in the family of John M. Cameron and clerked in a store owned by Denton Offutt. He was still working in the store on March 9, 1832, when he announced as a candidate for the Illinois legislature.

Six weeks after his entrance into the field of politics, the Black Hawk War broke out and on April 21, 1832, he enrolled for service and immediately left New Salem to join the military company of which he was elected captain. He had now been living in New Salem nine months and all available evidence seems to point to the fact that he had made his home with the Cameron's up to this time. Lincoln's service in the Black Hawk War lasted from April 21, 1832 to July 16, 1832 or four months, during which time he was continuously absent from the town.

It was not until after Lincoln's return from the Black Hawk War that McNamar made preparations for a trip to his home in the east. McNamar sold out his interest in the store partnership with Samuel Hill on September 4, 1832, and it was not long after this that he started on his journey. During this same month Lincoln purchased an interest in the Herndon-

Berry store in New Salem, and what appears to be a well-established tradition states that he slept in the back part of the store. William Herndon himself claims that Lincoln was living with Rowan Herndon previous to the purchase of the store.

Up to the first of January 1833 Abraham Lincoln had resided in New Salem not over twelve months, and during all this time with the exception of three months, John McNamar to whom Ann was betrothed was living in the town. Any love scene which associates Abraham and Ann with the Rutledge tavern and New Salem is purely mythical, and it is well established that Lincoln never made his home at the tavern while James Rutledge was the proprietor.

Abraham Lincoln was not appointed postmaster of New Salem until May 7, 1833. This was six months after the Rutledges left the town, so that Lincoln was not the New Salem postmaster while Ann lived there or for nearly nine months after McNamar left. Just how it was possible for Lincoln to keep up with McNamar's correspondence with Ann during this interval is problematical. When you remove the Rutledge tavern and the New Salem postoffice both from the scenery required to dramatize the mythical romance there is not much left for atmosphere but the banks of the Sangamon.

The Rutledges of Sand Ridge

Ann Rutledge did not live in New Salem for more than one year during the five or six years that Abraham Lincoln resided there. Shortly after McNamar left New Salem the Rutledge-Cameron mill venture failed and James Rutledge also was apparently forced to sell the tavern which

was acquired by Nelson Alley in November, 1832. Some months earlier, on February 20, 1832 Rutledge had sold the remaining acres of his Sand Ridge farm, so he was now without any land-holdings and apparently had no place to live. (Beveridge I, p. 148, 150). When he moved his family out of the tavern he established his home on the farm which he had previously sold to John McNamar. It is not known by what right he took up his residence there, but the fact remains that the Rutledge family within a few weeks after McNamar left New Salem were living in the home owned by the man to whom Ann was engaged and whom she intended to marry.

How soon after McNamar's departure Ann would begin to despair of his return, if she ever did have such thoughts, and invite the serious intentions of other young men is problematical. The fact that she was then living in the home owned by her betrothed might have some bearing on her opinion as to the certainty of his ultimate return to her if he was still alive which she had no reason to doubt.

If there ever was any relation between Ann and Abraham that approached a romance of which we have no worthwhile evidence, the courtship took place not between two young people of New Salem who saw each other every day, but between a young man in New Salem and a young lady living in the Sand Ridge community seven miles away. Fourteen miles in those days was a long distance for a girl to be traveling to the post office and back every day as it is implied she was a daily visitor there. It might also be of interest to know that the

mail arrived in New Salem but twice a week.

There are those who would have us believe that Abraham Lincoln became engaged to Ann Rutledge not long after McNamar left New Salem. Someone is said to have discovered near New Salem an elliptical-shaped stone about twelve inches long and seven inches in diameter on which the following inscription had been cut by a sharp instrument:

"A. Lincoln/ Ann Rutledge/ Were Betrothed/Here July 4/1833."

The "J" in July in the chiselled lettering is reversed as if made by an ignorant person which in itself seems to be sufficient evidence to question its genuineness.

The more important consideration, however, is the early date on which the betrothal is said to have taken place, July 4, 1833, but a few months after McNamar left New Salem. No one can give serious consideration to this betrothal announcement, and it would have been much more impressive to have found the betrothal stone out at Sand Ridge where Ann was then living.

Lincoln's Alleged Mental Collapse

The most ridiculous assertion in the Lincoln-Rutledge myth is the statement that upon the death of Ann Rutledge on September 1835 Abraham Lincoln became mentally unbalanced and people despaired of his life.

Most of the stories referring to Ann Rutledge's death state that she died of a broken heart. The probability is that she died of typhoid or malaria and three months later her father died of the same disease. Certainly Mr. Rutledge did not die of a broken

heart. It is very likely that Lincoln called upon Ann while she was ill, and one member of the Rutledge family said Abraham had visited her once, two weeks before her death.

William Herndon's earliest informant on Lincoln's supposed mental breakdown following Ann's death was John Hill whom we have had occasion to mention before and who was but three years of age when Lincoln left New Salem. On June 6, 1865, Hill wrote to Herndon: "Miss Ann Rutledge died within a few days of September 1, 1835, certain. Lincoln bore up under it very well until some days afterward when a hard rain fell which unnerved him." (Hertz p. 273). Herndon in his famous address claimed that Lincoln "sorrowed and grieved and rambled over the hills and through the forests day and night. He suffered and bore it for awhile like a great man—a philosopher. He slept not, he ate not, joyed not. This he did until his body became emaciated and weak and gave way. His mind wandered from its throne; in his imagination he muttered words to her he loved. His mind, his reasoning were somewhat dethroned and walked out of itself along the uncolumbed air and kissed and embraced the shadows and illusions of the heated brain. . . ."

It is generally known that Abraham Lincoln did suffer some mental relapses after the breaking of his engagement with Mary Todd. This was but six years after the death of Ann Rutledge. It would not be strange that people writing in 1866, twenty-five years after the Lincoln-Todd episode, might confuse Lincoln's condition at this time with the alleged Ann Rutledge romance.

This fact is certain, that contemporary evidence highly refutes the statement that Lincoln was incapacitated to carry on his routine work in 1835, and letters written by him about the time of Ann's death give no evidence whatever of any mental relapse. A friend of Lincoln's living near New Salem, wrote to his relatives, written just a month after Ann Rutledge died, and gave a personal description of Lincoln. He failed to make any mention of either Lincoln's love affair, Ann Rutledge's death, or Lincoln's unusual mental condition which would have been town talk if it were true.

The Poem

Herndon, in his famous address, concluded that the poem "Mortality" appealed to Lincoln because he associated it with Ann's death. Lincoln, himself, wrote to a friend about his first interest in the poem occurring as early as 1831, before he knew Ann, and that he did not again come in contact with it until 1845, ten years after Ann had passed away.

Herndon's deductions about the poem offers a good illustration of the purely fictitious data which permeates the whole story of the alleged Rutledge love affair. He was not satisfied with the building of his imaginary romance but took occasion to seriously offend the widow of Abraham Lincoln. He not only implied that Lincoln's heart was buried with Ann but on February 25, 1870 wrote to Lamon "Mr. Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge to his death no mistake . . . Lincoln never loved, i.e., dearly loved his Mary." (Hertz p. 65).

Refutations

As a final word about "The Ann Rutledge Myth," the refutations of some of Lincoln's closest friends are offered.

Herndon was advised by a former New Salem citizen that James Short could give more information about Lincoln than any or all "the men in the county." Short was a true friend of Lincoln and lived within half a mile of the home where the Rutledges resided at Sand Ridge when Lincoln is supposed to have been courting Ann. Short told Herndon he "knew nothing of love-making, much less an engagement." (Beveridge I, p. 150).

John McNamar to whom Ann was betrothed stated that he had never heard "any person say that Mr. Lincoln addressed Miss Ann Rutledge in terms of courtship." (Beveridge I, pp. 151 and 152).

About a year after McNamar departed for the East, Mary Owens visited New Salem and spent a month with her sister. Lincoln paid her some attention at this time and became so well pleased with her during this visit, that later on he told her sister, jokingly, that if she would bring Mary back from Kentucky he would marry her. Mary did come back about one year after Ann's death, and Lincoln's letter containing the marriage proposal is extant. Yet Mary Owens wrote in later years "I do not now recollect of ever hearing him (Abraham) mention her (Ann's) name." (Lamon p. 176).

On February 3, 1842 Lincoln wrote a letter to Joshua Speed at Louisville

who is said to have been his closest friend. He had occasion to write at some length about the illness of Speed's sweetheart. This would have been the very place where he would have written a word of sympathy to Speed about his worry over Ann Rutledge's illness if it had registered any deep impression upon him. During his many letters to Speed about his mental condition after breaking his engagement with Mary Todd, he never mentions having passed through a similar experience before. Herndon admits that Lincoln never told Speed about Ann Rutledge and Speed states that the Rutledge story "is all new" to him. (Hertz p. 159, Lamon p. 244).

Some members of the Rutledge family in later years were under the impression that Ann loved Lincoln; other members were just as certain that she liked McNamar better and that she would have married him upon his return. (Beveridge I, p. 151).

There is not known to exist a single autobiographical writing in which Lincoln transcribes the name Ann Rutledge. The note in Kirkham's book which states that she "is now studying grammar" is not in the hand writing of Abraham Lincoln as alleged.

If William Herndon used all of the collection of Lincoln folklore and tradition with the abandon which is revealed in his development of the "Ann Rutledge Myth," it is not strange that Lincoln students who have considered his three volume work a dependable source have been led far astray.

Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. I. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York 1928.

Emanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*. Viking Press, New York 1938.

Ward H. Lamon, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*. James R. Osgood and Company, Boston 1872.

George Alfred Townsend, *The Real Life of Abraham Lincoln*. Publication Office, Bible House, New York 1867.